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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000536

SIPDIS

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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ELECTIONS: GEMAYEL TELLS NEA DAS HALE
THE REAL ISSUE IS HIZBALLAH'S FUTURE

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a May 9 meeting, visiting NEA DAS David Hale discussed with former President Amine Gemayel the June 7 parliamentary elections and the possible consequences of a Hizballah-controlled government. Gemayel's son Sami assessed the election as a "tough race," and claimed Hizballah had "limitless" funds for campaigning. Gemayel asserted that a sovereign Lebanon was a threat to Syria's Alawite "junta," and warned that, despite Iranian and Syrian openness to talking with the U.S. administration on other matters, the two countries would never surrender their stake in Lebanon. Gemayel said that Hizballah was nothing more than the extension of the Iranian Republican Guard.

2. Gemayel was confident Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun would not sweep elections in Keserwan and Baabda, but added that country-wide polling was inaccurate due to some lists not being officially announced. Gemayel noted relations between Aoun and Speaker Berri were not good and Aoun was receiving Hizballah's full support over Berri. Gemayel claimed that Armenians from the U.S. and Canada are coming to Lebanon to bolster the vote in Beirut, Zahle, and Metn. Gemayel disparagingly remarked that Christians were "exhausted" from years of political battle, and it was their attrition from a unified bloc that allowed Aoun to become a formidable leader. End summary.

ELECTION THEME: HIZBALLAH'S FUTURE

3. (C) In a May 9 meeting, visiting NEA DAS David Hale, accompanied by the Ambassador and PolMilOff, met former President Amine Gemayel, his son Sami, and two Kataeb Party members at his Bikfaya residence. A strong-looking Gemayel, home from the hospital after having arterial stents implanted to relieve blockages in his heart, told Hale the essential issue of the elections was the future of Hizballah. He adamantly said Hizballah was more than an internal political issue. He insisted Hizballah's leadership, equipment, and strategy was Iranian, and Hizballah was nothing more than an

Iranian brigade on the coast of the Mediterranean. Hale remarked that Hizballah's alliance in March 8 and with Christians made the Hizballah threat even more complex.

14. (C) Gemayel cautioned that neither Syria nor Iran would surrender their stakes in Lebanon. He said that, despite the willingness of the Obama Administration to open talks with the two countries, neither of them would compromise or give up their influence in Lebanon. Gemayel believed a sovereign Lebanon was a threat to the Syrian Alawite "junta," and it would never leave.

15. (C) Gemayel opined that a March 8 election victory might be a setback for U.S. policy in the region, however, it would be a "catastrophe" for Lebanon. Hale replied that Lebanon was indeed a U.S. national security interest. He added that whenever Lebanon faced a crisis, Christian disunity and confusion ensued and contributed to the "Aoun phenomena." Gemayel agreed, saying Aoun had risen due to Christian "attrition" from the previously more unified bloc.

WE WILL CONTINUE THE FIGHT

16. (C) Gemayel's son, Sami, running as a first-time candidate in Metn, told Hale the election would be a "tough race." Sami claimed, with Amine's affirmation, that Hizballah had limitless funds for campaigning. "You feel the expenses," Sami remarked. Nevertheless, we will do our best he concluded.

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17. (C) Without all of the lists officially announced, polling results provided an unclear picture, Gemayel said. Sami added that in Zahle and north Metn, there could be some surprises, and noted, the challenge is to protect your strengths and push harder where you are weak. Gemayel assessed that Jbeil was still a problem for March 14, campaigning without a unified front. Something must be worked out between Fares Souaid and Nazem Khoury soon, Gemayel remarked. (Note: Independent candidate and former advisor to President Michel Sleiman, Nazem Khoury formed a list in Jbeil that excluded March 14 SYG Souaid, therein splitting the anti-March 8 vote and harming them both. End note.)

18. (C) Gemayel declared that Aoun would not win all five seats in his own district of Keserwan, and in Baabda, Aoun would not sweep its six seats. Tripoli presented no problems, he remarked. Gemayel indicated that a general meeting of March 14 candidates was coming soon to discuss strategy for the last 30 days before the election. (Comment: As of May 11, we still had not heard the meeting was yet scheduled. End comment.)

BERRI VS. AOUN

19. (C) Gemayel assessed that the rift between FPM leader Aoun and Speaker Berri about voting lists in Jezzine was not resolved and relations were not good. Gemayel believed Hizballah controlled the Shia vote and it was giving its backing to Aoun. Gemayel concluded Berri had no leverage with Aoun over candidate issues and would have to accept the fact that Aoun was Hizballah's man for the moment. (Note: Aoun has not yet endorsed Berri to be the next Speaker. End note.)

THE ARMENIANS ARE COMING!

110. (C) Gemayel noted to DAS Hale that 4000 Armenians were reportedly coming to Lebanon from the U.S. (Los Angeles and Boston) and Canada, and Gemayel sarcastically asked Hale if he could stop them before they vote in Beirut I, Zahle and

Metn.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Gemayel, along with Sami, exhibited a fighting spirit discussing the elections, often missing with other March 14 interlocutors. End comment.
SISON